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SUBJECT: Comoran President Announces Referendum May 17

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Comoran President Sambi announced the constitutional referendum will be held May 17. The new draft revision has not been made public yet, but is expected to concentrate powers in the Union presidency, reduce island autonomy, and allow Sambi to extend his current term in office. Opposition leaders have publicly vowed to prevent the referendum from taking place "by all means possible." END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) In a radio address April 15, Union of the Comoros President Sambi announced that a referendum would be held May 17 to revise the constitution; the campaign begins April 25. Having previously postponed the referendum, the President spent the last several weeks in negotiations with the three island presidents to seek consensus on a way forward. After Sambi informed the dip corps April 10 that they had reached consensus, it appears the talks ended instead in disagreement.

3. (SBU) The GOC will have to issue a decree for the referendum including the proposed changes to the constitution. The President has confirmed that he will take into account recommendations from the March 4-7 Inter-Comoran Dialogue. However, it is expected that the revised constitution will include a provision for the President to remain in power beyond his current mandate, which ends in 2010. It is also expected to concentrate power in the central Union government and to diminish island autonomy. In recent meetings, Sambi has explained his intentions regarding his mandate are only based on the need to "harmonize" mandates to reduce the number of costly elections. As to the changes for Union power, he insists these are necessary for the Comoros to develop. A "Congress" of parliaments, once the National and three island assemblies are elected, would be asked to decide on the exact date of the next Union President election, based on the revised constitution, if it passes.

Opposition Opposes Referendum

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4. (SBU) "Opposition" island presidents Abdouwahabi (Grande Comore) and Ali Said (Moheli) announced April 12 that talks with the Union had "failed." In a meeting with the dip corps late April 15, Abdouwahabi criticized Sambi's government for being inflexible in negotiations. Perhaps in desperation, both Abdouwahabi and Ali Said announced on April 12 their willingness to step down in 2010 (two years early) in order to pressure Sambi to respect the end of his mandate. (Note: Sambi answered them in his speech: because Anjouan president Moussa Toybou refuses to step down in 2010, he ignores the offer and will move forward with his referendum, including provisions to extend his mandate. End Note.) Abdouwahabi reiterated his argument that Sambi's effort to prolong his term in office via a referendum that "retroactively" applies to his mandate would be illegal.

5. (SBU) Separately, some 15 opposition political parties, including that of former President Azali, issued a declaration denouncing President Sambi's attempt to remain in office. They called the referendum illegal and called on the three island presidents and the

Comoran people to actively prevent the referendum from taking place.

The statement included a scathing criticism of Sambi, noting millions in foreign assistance (EU, Arab League, Kuwait Fund, and others) while civil servant salaries remain unpaid and there are no signs of development. They also attacked Sambi for his dealings with the "Arab mafia" led by Comoro Gulf Holdings Bashar Kiwan. The politicians noted Kiwan has reportedly been arrested and investigated in Dubai for fraud related to a telecom license he obtained in the Comoros. Unconfirmed reports suggest that "billionaire Talal Alkhoury" invested USD 34 million in the deal, but claims Kiwan defrauded him, embezzled the money for other uses, and sold the license to another operator. The statement notes Kiwan's "Federal Commerce Bank" (BFC) is "open" in Moroni, but still does not have a license. They also highlight the "illegal" passage of the economic citizenship law, under pressure from Kiwan, which now appears to be allowing the GOC to sell passports to stateless persons in Kuwait and the Emirates.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Whatever the intentions or legality of the referendum, President Sambi's determination to move forward with it may come at a high cost to the Comoros' fragile stability. Longtime international legal experts in the Comoros note that Anjouan would never and will never accept the new constitutional arrangements the minute one of their own is no longer in power. Diplomats agree there is no "need" for Sambi to extend his mandate, though no one has told him as much. It appears one strong reason to prolong the mandate is pressure from Bashar Kiwan, who has enormous influence with Sambi and is providing "benefits" to GOC officials. Kiwan's interests, including the "economic citizenship" deal from which he appears to be profiting, would be unlikely to survive in a post-Sambi Comoros. Opposition promises of "extreme measures" and "inspiration from Madagascar" deserve to be taken seriously given

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what is at stake. END COMMENT

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